

# Attempt To Trigger Civil War Fails in Iraq

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Someone certainly wants civil war in Iraq. The atrocities committed against Shi'ite worshippers on March 2, at holy sites in Baghdad and Kerbala, could have no other motivation than to pit Shi'ites against Sunnis. It was only the firm authority of the highest religious Shi'a leadership, Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani—echoed by his Sunni counterparts—which prevented a spiral of revenge and counter-revenge lynchings. Al-Sistani called for calm and national unity; Sunni scholars also refused to fall into the trap, as their religious leaders in Falluja issued appeals for blood donations to save Shi'ites' lives in Kerbala and Baghdad.

It was well known beforehand that 2-3 million Shi'ites were expected to gather in the holy city of Kerbala on March 2, on the anniversary of the martyrdom of the third Imam, Hussein. Hussein, who was the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, was killed at Kerbala by the army of Caliph Yazid in 680. Hussein's father, Ali, had been murdered 19 years earlier, leading to the central schism in Islam between Sunni and Shi'a. After Ali's death, the Umayyads had moved the caliphate to Damascus and established a kingdom, with hereditary succession. Hussein rejected this, and resisted thousands of soldiers who had surrounded him and his family members and followers. He was ordered to return to Medina, but refused. In the ensuing seven-day battle, he was killed, his head severed and sent to Egypt, while his body was buried in Kerbala, in the shrine dedicated to him.

Imam Hussein is revered as a great martyr, as important for Shi'ite (and other) Muslims as Joan of Arc for the French, or Christ for all Christians. His resistance was not only religious, but highly political. It is said that his killers have been long gone and forgotten, while Hussein continues to change history every day and every year. He is known for having been willing to give his life for a principle.

## **Demonstrations for National Elections**

The commemorations slated for Kerbala, and in Baghdad at the al-Khadimiyya shrine (where two Shi'ite religious figures, Imam Musa Kazem and his grandson Imam Muhammed al-Jawad, are buried), were particularly significant; it was the first time in decades that Iraq's Shi'ites had been able to freely observe this holy day. One day earlier, largely ignored by international media, political demonstrations had taken place in Kerbala and elsewhere to denounce the foreign occupation; British, American, and Israeli flags were demonstratively

burned. At least 100,000 people demonstrated in Baghdad on March 1, calling for elections. Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim presented the policy of Ayatollah al-Sistani, that national elections must be held as soon as possible.

Then, on the holiest Shi'ite holiday, explosions ripped through the shrines in the capital and Kerbala, leaving hundreds of dead and wounded. As noted by the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on March 4, in another setting, revenge murders would have occurred. The response of Ayatollah al-Sistani, issued immediately, was crucial: "While we lay the responsibility on the occupying forces, for their foot-dragging and laxity in controlling the borders of Iraq and preventing infiltration from neighboring countries, and for not enhancing the national security forces, who are assigned to provide security for the nation, and enabling the competent elements, providing them with equipment and logistics which are necessary to carry out their mission; we call on all the sons of the Iraqi people, to exercise more caution and to be aware of the schemes of the enemy and of those who have ambitions in our country; and I urge them to work seriously, to close ranks and speak with one voice, in order to bring about a quick return, to this wounded country, of its sovereignty, independence, and stability."

Al-Sistani's remarks were echoed by those of the secretary general of the Scholars of Iraq, Harith al-Dhari, a Sunni leader, whose brother was recently killed in a crime attributed to "Shi'ites." Speaking on television, al-Dhari said the bloodletting in Kerbala and Baghdad had been the responsibility of the U.S. and its agents. A statement by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also placed the blame on the occupying forces. Khamenei added, "Iraq's political and cultural scholars should make every effort to oust the occupiers and establish a national, Islamic government in Iraq." And Lebanese Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrullah denounced an occupation plot behind the bombings.

### Who Are the Perpetrators?

Whoever was materially behind the suicide bombings at in Baghdad and Kerbala, the responsibility does lie at the doorstep of the occupying powers. Angry Iraqis made this clear as they pelted stones at U.S. tanks in Baghdad; it is the Americans who started the war and imposed the occupation. One assumption shared by the entire population, is that such an atrocity could not have been the work of Iraqis, or religious Muslims.

The line immediately put out by the occupying powers was, predictably, that it was al-Qaeda. Speaking immediately after the events, Vice President Cheney told American television that almost certainly, al-Qaeda and Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi were the guilty parties. Central Command chief Gen. John Abizaid, testifying before the House Armed Services Committee on March 4, was specific: "We have clear intelligence," he said, "that ties Zarqawi to this attack. We also

have intelligence that shows there are some linkages between Zarqawi and former regime elements, particularly the Iraqi intelligence services." Other U.S. officials, led by Iraq consul Paul Bremer, fell into step, promptly declaring, "Zarqawi did it."

Zarqawi is said to be a Jordanian militant Islamist with links to al-Qaeda. Prominent press coverage had been given to the news, weeks ago, that a courier of Zarqawi's had been intercepted by the U.S. forces, with a CD containing a message by the terrorist. In it, he had vowed to ignite civil strife between the Sunnis and the Shi'a, in Iraq. How the message was intercepted, who the courier was, whether or not the recording is authentic—all are big question marks.

Nasrullah of the Hezbollah in Lebanon called the bluff on al-Qaeda, challenging them, if they were behind the attacks, to come out and explain to Muslims worldwide why they should applaud such vile murder. In response, an "al-Qaeda" office abroad issued a statement, denying any involvement.

General Abizaid testified that the United States had had prior intelligence that the attacks would occur. "I believe the plan was for even greater carnage," he said, "and I think that joint action between Americans and Iraqis prevented that from happening, and we had better cooperation among various groups throughout Iraq in terms of security than is widely reported."

It might be asked, what prior intelligence Israel might have had? Several regional experts have noted that the Sharon wing in Israel, along with the neo-conservatives in Washington, share the view that if Iraq is blown up in civil war, it can easily be partitioned in three parts, *à la* Henry Kissinger's public argument.

The Zarqawi cover story is dismissed by government officials in the region, who say that the details being put out by the Americans are "mythical." One profile provided to *EIR* is that al-Zarqawi is a Jordanian anti-Shi'ia fanatic, whose actual name is Fadel al-Khalayleh, and who has been traced to Pakistan in the 1980s, before going to Afghanistan.

At the same time, there is clearly no underlying inter-Muslim civil conflict going on, despite the claims put out by the Samuel Huntington-Bernard Lewis clash of civilizations school, that this is "natural."

There is a crucial overlooked element—a British double game, with Israeli involvement. Some force wants bloody destabilization, and the British—who are both "with" the United States in Iraq, and "against" it—have a history of such double operations. The British want to secure a future advantage for themselves, playing off a major embarrassment for the United States, which is already hated throughout the Middle East. As to the Israeli government, regional sources report that it is in a campaign to systematically eliminate all moderate Shi'ites in Iraq, leaving only the most radical forces, who would be an excuse for new repression, brutalization, and extending the occupation. This mode of killing the moderates is what the Ariel Sharon and Eretz Israel forces have long

used against the Palestinian leadership.

The British and Israeli motives are coherent with the dirty operations of the U.S. neo-conservative networks, which use terrorism as covert warfare to secure their policy objectives.

### **The Political Battle Begins**

Responsible Iraqi leaders, including religious authorities, remain focussed on wielding their authority to force through a political solution.

Just prior to the attacks, the Iraqi Governing Council had reached an agreement, under immense pressure from Bremer, on an interim constitution, to allow for the formal transfer of sovereignty by June 30. Disagreement over the basis for law, as well as the role of the Kurdish autonomous area, had led to a walkout by Shi'ite members on the eve of the Feb. 28 deadline set by Bremer. Under enhanced pressure, a compromise formula was found, whereby Islam would be "a" (rather than "the") source of law, no laws would be passed that violated Islam, and the principle of federation would be upheld, without any details given regarding Kurdish claims. The Kurds were allowed to maintain their militias, the *peshmerga*, a concession which did not please the Shi'ite representatives, whose militias have been outlawed. Elections were slated to be held by the end of 2004, or in January 2005 at the latest.

Despite continuing disagreement, all signed, including the Shi'ites, who have been following the guidance of al-Sistani. This was done for political reasons, according to sources in Iran; that is, after having received the guarantee of elections as demanded, Ayatollah al-Sistani aims at forcing through its implementation, in order to establish an elected government which can end the occupation. The aim is to force the occupying military forces to leave.

If the United States were to renege on its promises, and/or to attempt the merely cosmetic transfer of sovereignty currently on Washington's agenda, the combined force of the Shi'ite and Sunni religious authorities, whose cooperation has been consolidated by the tragic March 2 events, could bring millions of Iraqis into the streets. Awareness of this fact has forced the occupation to make the concessions it has made thus far, but they will not suffice.

A provoked civil war will not work. In fact, there is no basis in Iraqi history for such a Shi'ite-Sunni conflict. And the corollary to this fact is that the occupation will not function. The only rational and just solution lies in the withdrawal of the occupying forces, with the transfer of responsibility for overseeing elections, to the United Nations.

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